

Thomas Dickson, Empire Builder and Gentleman Part 2

By S. Robert Powell, Ph.D.

At the grand opening ceremony of the New York & Canada Railroad in November 1875, Thomas Dickson gave the following summary statement of the growth of the D&H in the course of the nineteenth century: "To convey to you an adequate impression of the growth of the Company, I may say that in 1830, the total product was 43,000 tons, and in 1860, the year of my entering the service of the Company the product had reached 541,000 tons; the present year it will be three millions; in 1860 the Company had a productive capacity of not to exceed 600,000 tons per annum, had 108 miles of canal, and 23 miles of railroad; its productive capacity is now four millions of tons per annum [In 1899, four and a half million tons of coal were shipped to market by the D&H], and in addition to the canal it owns and operates 700 miles of railway, besides some 200 miles of underground railway in their mines; and while the capital stock has been increased from time to time, until now it reaches twenty millions, the increase of product and of the business has been much larger in proportion."

Having worked energetically to construct and manage the anthracite mining and transportation empire that the D&H had become in post-Civil War America, Thomas Dickson took a year's leave of absence from the D&H, and he and his wife took their long-contemplated trip around the world.

On September 7, 1871, just previous to the departure of the Dicksons from Scranton on their round the world tour, the Dicksons hosted a grand reception at their residence in Scranton. The following announcement of that reception was published in the *Carbondale Advance* of September 2, 1871, p. 3: "**The Great Social Event.** / The special social event of the week is the grand reception, to be given by Thos. Dickson, esq., President of the Del. & Hud. C. Co., and Lady, at their residence in Scranton, on this evening—just previous to their leaving home on a trip to China and thence around the world. It will doubtless surpass in magnificence, and the perfection of the arrangements for the comfort and pleasure of the guests, anything seen in Northern Pennsylvania."

The world tour by the Dicksons is described by Samuel C. Logan in *The Life of Thomas Dickson A Memorial* (Scranton, 1888, pp. 96-97) as follows: "...About the first of September, 1871, Mr. Dickson left his home in Scranton thus accompanied by his wife, going westward to make this tour of the world. On the 24th of that month they arrived at San Francisco, and sailed from that port in the steamship 'Republic,' on the 28th, for the port of Japan and from thence to Hong-Kong. In China Mr. and Mrs. Dickson were joined by their son, who journeyed with them and returned home with them to remain. They passed through the chief countries of Asia. They traveled through Syria and Palestine on horse-back. They climbed the pyramids of Egypt, and sailed up and down the Nile together. They threaded the narrow channels of the historic islands of the Mediterranean, sailed along the borders of Asia Minor, and thence back through the islands of Greece into Italy. Here they met friends from home and with them made the tour of Europe, using every sort of conveyance.

"They passed through Italy and climbed the mountain passes of Switzerland. They drove through Germany, stopping to drink life-waters from the medicinal fountains. They looked into the gay life

of Paris and the more substantial one of London, and then passed northerly through England, and reveled among the historic hills and valleys of Scotland, in midsummer. They visited all the points which had been deemed sacred around the fireside of the emigrants in the far-off country, and traced the foot-prints of their fathers through Scotland and northern England; thence they passed into Ireland to visit what Mr. Dickson calls 'the land where my masters come from'—referring to the great number of Irish laborers it had been his life-work to employ and to serve. The tour of Scotland, Ireland, and England was completed toward the end of August, when they sailed from Liverpool on the homeward voyage. They arrived safely at home on the 27th day of August; thus having encircled the earth in just about the space of one year."

Throughout this tour of the world, Thomas Dickson wrote many letters home. These letters home from Thomas Dickson are described by *Logan* (pp. 97-98) as follows: "From the start, he [Thomas Dickson] adopted the plan of letter-writing to his family and relatives at home, giving thereby an accurate account of his travels and impressions. These letters were forwarded with business regularity, containing accurate pictures of the lands they visited; but among them, ever visible was the unconsciously-drawn picture of the traveler himself. They were written in all manner of straits and with every conceivable inconvenience, but they were masterpieces of personal correspondence. These letters were preserved, and afterward collected and bound in a book constituting 276 pages, foolscap size. They were never intended for publication, but they remain a family souvenir, containing a great amount of knowledge and many marks of literary ability, as well as of an accurate observation." One can not help but wonder if this 276-page volume of Thomas Dickson's letters home from his world tour of 1871-1872 still exists.

Public lectures on all topics, presented by a wide variety of distinguished Americans, were a regular feature of life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America. Not surprisingly, Thomas Dickson delivered a series of public lectures on the trip that he and his wife made around the world (September 1871-August 27, 1872) in the period 1873-1879.

On February 25, 1873, he delivered a public lecture at the opera house in Scranton. In the *Carbondale Leader* of February 15, 1873, p. 3, we read: "Mr. Thomas Dickson will lecture at the opera house, Scranton, on the 25th of this month. The proceeds are to be applied to the library fund of the Y. M. C. A."

In the March 1, 1873 issue (p. 3) of the *Carbondale Leader*, there is a notice about a lecture that Thomas Dickson gave on February 25, 1873 in Scranton. From that article we learn that two hundred and fifty people from Carbondale took the train to Scranton to hear the lecture. From that same issue of the *Carbondale Leader*, we learn that "a good many young men" from Carbondale took advantage of the low fare offered by the D&H to those who wished to attend Thomas Dickson's lecture on February 25 and went to Scranton, not to attend Thomas Dickson's lecture, but to attend other kinds of presentations: "A good many of our economical young men took advantage of the low rates of fare on Tuesday evening, and instead of going to hear Mr. Dickson's lecture, attended the Varieties." Enterprising. Amusing. Young men will be young men.

On November 19, 1874, Thomas Dickson, "a lecturer of decided abilities," presented a lecture, titled "What I Saw in India," to the "nearly filled spacious opera-house" in Scranton. The lecture was a benefit for the Y. M. C. A. (*Carbondale Advance* of November 21, 1874, p. 3)

On December, 23, 1874, Thomas Dickson delivered a lecture "to the largest house of the season" in Nealon's Hall, Carbondale, to benefit the Young Men's Library Association. In the *Carbondale Advance* of December 26, 1874, p. 3, we read: "**The Lecture.** / The "largest house of the season" greeted Mr. Dickson at Nealon's Hall last night—Wednesday. Every seat was filled and every person in attendance seemed delighted with the lecture, which abounded with descriptive eloquence, wit, pathos and sentiment. The lecture was also a great pecuniary success to the Young Men's Library Association. Not only this association, but our citizens generally, who were in attendance, thank Mr. Dickson for his lecture." On May 1, 1875, Thomas Dickson spoke in Hyde Park, Scranton, for the benefit of the Presbyterian Church.

In January, 1878, Thomas Dickson presented an eloquent and interesting description of India, as seen by himself, in Carbondale's Methodist church, which was well filled for the occasion: "**Lecture of Mr. Dickson.** / Notwithstanding the very unfavorable state of the weather last Tuesday evening, the M. E. Church was well filled, by an intelligent and appreciative audience, to listen to Mr. Dickson. A few minutes was devoted to singing, after which the speaker was introduced by Rev. Mr. Shelland. He commenced with an amusing incident, which brought down the house, and then proceeded to give an intelligible, eloquent, and interesting description of India, as seen by himself, taking up in detail, the different places through which he passed, giving a vivid description of all that was worth seeing and admiring, interspersed with occasional humorous anecdotes, which kept the audience in constant good humor. Mr. Dickson, by this lecture, has added to his already enviable reputation as a lecturer, and we hope the day is not far distant when we may have the pleasure of listening to him again." (*Carbondale Leader*, January 20, 1878, p. 3)

In December, 1879, Thomas Dickson lectured on "Syria and Palestine" in the Ross Street Methodist Episcopal church in Wilkes-Barre for the benefit of the church. This was a lecture that he had previously delivered in Carbondale: "**MR. THOMAS DICKSON AS A LECTURER.** / Mr. Thomas Dickson is to deliver his lecture on 'Syria and Palestine' in the Ross street M. E. church, Wilkes-Barre, on the evening of the 19th inst. Our own people have had the pleasure of hearing this entertaining and instructive lecture. It is delivered not only gratis for benevolent objects, but Mr. Dickson always insists on paying the admission fee. His literary efforts are highly creditable to him, as well as the means of drawing many dollars into the treasury of churches and benevolent institutions throughout a wide extent of country. If 'corporations have no souls,' it cannot be said of the highest officer of one of the greatest of them." (*Carbondale Leader*, December 13, 1879, p. 2)

Following the world tour of the Thomas and Mrs. Dickson, Thomas Dickson continued to serve the D&H, but it became more and more difficult for him to do so as the years passed. In the spring of 1882, at the urging of family and friends and for the benefit of his health, Thomas Dickson and family again traveled abroad for three months, this time to England, Scotland, and the European continent.

The Dicksons sailed for Europe in early May 1882 and returned that autumn. Four of the letters that Thomas Dickson wrote home to his sister, Mrs. A. Watt, in Carbondale, were published in the *Carbondale Advance*: The first from **Disentiser Hof, Disentis, Switzerland, July 20, 1882.** (*Carbondale Advance*, August 26, 1882, p. 3); the second from **Regent's Hotel, / Leamington,**

Aug. 8, 1882. (*Carbondale Advance*, August 26, 1882, p. 3); the third from **CALEDONIAN HOTEL, INVERNESS, SCOTLAND, August 27, 1882.** (*Carbondale Advance* of September 16, 1882, p. 3; the fourth from **ST. ENOCH'S HOTEL, GLASGOW, Sept. 24, 1882.**"(*Carbondale Advance* of October 14, 1882, p. 3).

In early November, 1882, Thomas Dickson and family returned home from their second trip abroad. Friends from Carbondale, we learn from the following notice, were enthusiastically awaiting his return and hoping that he would favor the city of Carbondale with a public talk here on the incidents of his journey, and his later impressions on the situation in the countries through which he has travelled:

“RETURN OF THOMAS DICKSON. / Thomas Dickson, Esq., and family will arrive at New York from their European trip on Sunday next, Providence permitting. We learn that late advices from them represent that the journey has been a delightful one, and has done much to recuperate Mr. Dickson’s health. The only drawback to their complete happiness has been the reception of the news of the decease of some dear friends on this side of the Atlantic. Mr. Dickson will receive a cordial welcome home from his numerous friends and relatives, but nowhere, and from no community, will his welcome be more demonstrative and sincere than here where he spent his early years. Already a movement has been started to secure from him a public talk in this city on the incidents of his journey, and his later impressions on the situation in the countries through which he has travelled. It is hoped that Mr. Dickson may accept the invitation, and that our people may be the first to be favored with a recital from his own lips of what he observed on his recent foreign tour.” (*Carbondale Leader*, November 3, 1882, p. 2)

Leading members of the Presbyterian church of Carbondale and prominent citizens of the town quickly presented an earnest invitation to Thomas Dickson for a lecture here. He replied that the “press of business would for some time prevent his doing anything in the line of lecturing; but that, should he at anytime in the future decide to enter upon a public description of his recent travels, his friends at Carbondale will have the first opportunity of listening to him.” (*Carbondale Advance*, November 18, 1882, p. 3)

Thomas Dickson, in rapidly declining health, divided his time now between Scranton and Carbondale and his summer residence in Morristown, New Jersey. He died on July 31, 1884. His earthly remains are interred in the Dickson Mausoleum in the Dunmore, PA Cemetery.

Thomas Dickson was not only an empire builder but also a gentleman, which was a rare and wonderful combination of virtues, then as now. The mining and transportation system that he developed in post-Civil War America and the communities that were born and prospered because of that mining and transportation system remained vital for over a hundred years, which made it possible for an untold number of miners and railroaders and their families to lead enriched and meaningful lives. We owe him a lot.

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